

Advocates get sign-ups for CHIP program

**By DIANE COCHRAN
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Even as state and national politicians debate the fate of the Children's Health Insurance Plan, local advocates are pressing to bring coverage to as many kids as they can.

On Friday, nine children signed up for CHIP during a first-of-its-kind enrollment fair at Lockwood School.

"Every child who parents came for was eligible for services," said Judy Stewart, director of strategic partnerships for the Yellowstone City-County Health Department.

CHIP provides free or low-cost health insurance to children up to age 19 whose families meet certain income guidelines.

The program was developed by the federal government a decade ago and will expire in September unless Congress acts to renew it.

At the state level, legislators have discussed changing income guidelines to make more children eligible.

In Montana, 13,291 children are covered by CHIP, and funding is available for about 600 more, according to Michael Mahoney, the program's community relations manager.

Local advocates have become leaders in the effort to get more children into the program, Mahoney said.

CHIP enrollment in Yellowstone County, where 1,369 children are covered, has increased by almost 20 percent from this time last year, he said. Statewide, enrollment increased by 9 percent during the same time period.

The double-digit jump is partially attributable to Yellowstone County being a population center, Mahoney said. But credit should also be given to local advocates.

"The folks in Yellowstone are very organized in doing CHIP outreach," Mahoney said. "You can't live in Billings and not have somebody telling you about the CHIP program."

Families were invited to the Lockwood School enrollment fair through a letter sent home with students.

Fairgoers could also sign up for programs that help pay for eye exams and prescription drugs.

Stewart and Carol Blank, the school's nurse, said it made sense to reach out to families at places where they already go on regular basis, such as schools.

"We're sure we have families who would be eligible," Blank said. "We just need to reach them."

She and Stewart hope to tweak the enrollment fair idea and expand it to other locations.

"Healthy kids do better in school," Stewart said. "They do better in life."

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